

# “I Think We’re Going to Need Some Scary Monsters”: An Interview with Picador Professor Paul La Farge

Paul La Farge  
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*aspeers*: Good afternoon, Mr. La Farge. We would first like to know: What are some of your literary influences, and who are your favorite writers?

**La Farge**: That’s almost an impossible question to answer. The first work that made me want to write fiction was Donald Barthelme’s story “See the Moon?” which I read in high school. The first two sentences of it were: “See the moon? It hates us.” And I thought, ‘Wow, I have no idea what you are talking about, but now I want to know, and I am going to read this story.’ Curiously, around the same time I read Italo Calvino’s book *Cosmicomics*. There is a story in that collection which is also about the moon, called “The Distance of the Moon.” It’s a beautiful and very sad story about a fictional time when the moon was very close to Earth, and people would climb up bamboo ladders to the moon, gather things from it and then jump back down. The story contains a long and rather fantastic description of what the moon is made of, and there was something in that description which opened a door for me. From there, my list of favorites goes off in all directions, from Gabriel García Márquez’s *A Hundred Years of Solitude* to Marilynne Robinson, who occupies a very different place with regard to depictions of reality. Her novel *Gilead* was a transformative book for me in terms of thinking about what fiction is, what it can be, and how it can accomplish its many purposes.

I think the books that I am looking for are always the ones that have a kernel of joy, which does not mean that they have to be happy books. *Gilead*, for example, is a novel about feeling powerless to protect the ones you love from harm, powerless to keep the people who you think love you in love with you. But running underneath all of that is just the joy of being in the world. Robinson is a religious writer and so her experience of joy is religious, but it is also a joy in seeing the design of the world, which is as much a religious experience as it is a writer’s experience. Because when you

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write a story, you are making sense of the world, looking for a pattern in disconnected phenomena, and you are taking some delight and joy in finding it. I think you could find the same thing in Calvino, another very sad person, or in Márquez, Kafka, or Barthelme, who is rather more paranoid, but also full of this delight. “See the moon? It hates us.” What a terrible thing to think, but at the same time, how wonderful to think that we could be in a relationship of animosity with the moon. Its presence is not neutral—it is actually thinking about us—why does it hate us?

*aspeers:* When and how did you decide to become a writer?

**La Farge:** When I was a kid, I wanted to tell stories and write them down. I was this insufferable child who would write long mystery and fantasy stories and make my parents type them up. I would read them to people, and everybody was like: ‘Oh my God, just shut up with those stories! No one wants to hear your mystery story. It isn’t even a mystery, and we don’t get it.’ But I was really into it. However, it wasn’t until I started to think about reading not just as a way to get away from the solitude of your living existence but as a way to actually do something that was new and exciting, that I thought I might want to be a writer.

*aspeers:* Did you ever have any other profession in mind in case you didn’t end up being a writer?

**La Farge:** I tried lots of things, but it turns out that I’m not good at anything else. I kept getting fired from all those other jobs. I thought about being a professional scholar, getting a PhD, and I got about a year into that before realizing that I wasn’t temperamentally suited for it. Academia turned out to be a very career-minded profession, at least from my point of view. It seemed much less about free intellectual inquiry and much more about building a career.

I worked as a web designer, because it was quite lucrative in the nineties in California, but, again, I never really committed to it. Those are the only things I ever did with any seriousness. I mean, I wanted to be an astronaut, too. But there were some problems with that.

*aspeers:* What would you say is the best thing about your profession in your daily life? What is a moment when you feel glad about doing this for a living?

**La Farge:** I think the best thing about writing is that I get to think about what I want, to read what I want, and to engage with the world in a way that I want to by learning things, going places, and talking to people. Maybe for that reason it doesn’t get boring, because I’m not doing something to satisfy somebody else. Even teaching feels like something I’m doing according to my own sense of what I think my students might need to know, at least some of the time.

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**aspeers:** How much do you think about the accessibility of your writing during the writing process? What level of engagement do you expect from your readers (e.g., considering that *Luminous Airplanes* was published as both a book and an immersive hypertext)?

**La Farge:** The *Luminous Airplanes* hypertext was a formal experiment. It was a way to see whether digital media could be a useful medium for long-form narrative fiction. Only in a very indirect way was accessibility the reason for the hypertext: It was free because I wanted a lot of people to look at it.

**aspeers:** Was the process of writing this hypertext version very different from your ‘usual’ approach to writing a book, and was it difficult to go back to something more linear when you started on your upcoming novel *The Night Ocean*?

**La Farge:** Yes, a hypertext version was harder. The form didn’t exist until I had nearly finished writing, and I didn’t know how to shape the text, so I just wrote parts of the story. It was unclear how to organize and present them, but the whole project came together just a few months before the publishing date, when I finally had the Web backend working, and I could put the texts into it, connecting the pieces: AHA! It’s like that. It’s great. It was a joyful experience that came after a very long and painful period. So in contrast, *The Night Ocean* was an easy book to write.

**aspeers:** *The Night Ocean* deals with H. P. Lovecraft’s friendship with Robert H. Barlow. What sparked your interest in the life and work of this writer?

**La Farge:** I was at Bard College in the spring of 2005, and the poet Robert Kelly, who teaches there, took me to dinner. We talked about all kinds of things, and somehow we started talking about H. P. Lovecraft. It turned out that Robert was a fan of Lovecraft’s work, just as I was, and he told me a story about Lovecraft going to visit Barlow in Florida in the 1930s, which was strange: Lovecraft didn’t have many friends and didn’t spend much time with other people. I was intrigued, and I wanted to look into the story. I thought it might be good material for a book.

I started writing, then I stopped, and I came back to the project seven years later, when I had a fellowship at the New York Public Library. I looked for further information about Lovecraft, his friends, readers, fans, publishers, and so on. I found the characters completely fascinating, and I wanted to find a way to tell the story about how interesting and strange their lives were. The book emerged from that.

**aspeers:** The fictional worlds you create are inhabited by a variety of grotesque and strange characters. Your writing has been compared to magical realists like Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges, and you often use intertextuality and a postmodern playfulness with language. What does this more fantastic quality in your writing allow you to achieve that a more traditional realist mode of writing would not?

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**La Farge:** Fantastic elements aren't necessarily separate from reality. I believe that telling a story is a part of reality, and fantasy is a part of storytelling. If you follow the energy, the impulse of the story, and it leads you to a fantastic place, then that's the story you tell.

**aspeers:** In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Leslie Fiedler famously claimed that all American novels are, at core, part of the Gothic tradition. Do you think this holds true for your writing as well?

**La Farge:** Yes, on a formal level, my novels foreground the telling of stories in a way that feels Gothic to me. The use of frame narratives, I mean, and all the apparatuses that come forward in the Gothic novel, and the way that stories happen within the stories. So yes, guilty as charged.

**aspeers:** The topic for this year's call for papers of *aspeers* was 'American Monsters.' With that in mind, what do you think are reasons for contemporary US American culture's interest in monsters? Zombies, vampires, and psychopaths just keep coming back in film and fiction, and their popularity doesn't seem to be waning.

**La Farge:** I think the interest in monsters isn't American or contemporary at all—it's a very old interest. But I wonder if the contemporary moment is more about familiarizing the monsters, or incorporating the monsters into an ironic tradition than it is about engaging with a first-order experience of the horrible. I'm trying to think of the great monsters of recent years, and what comes to mind are the ones from the eighties and nineties, but they are all humans: Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* or Hannibal Lector in *Silence of the Lambs*. I don't really think about the zombie, or the werewolf, or Frankenstein's monster, although Frankenstein's monster does keep coming back, as an artificial intelligence, often, or as a robot. I feel that, in a way, the heroic age of the monster is behind us. Now we have domesticated monsters, or nostalgic monsters, or ironic, notional, or distributed monsters.

**aspeers:** So are scary monsters going to come back?

**La Farge:** I think we're going to need some scary monsters.

**aspeers:** Monster themes are sometimes intertwined with apocalyptic narratives, which we know you are also interested in. Why do you think American society is fascinated with the apocalypse?

**La Farge:** Apocalyptic narratives were a big part of my childhood. I grew up in New York in the 1980s, the Reagan era, when the threat of nuclear war was very present. You felt that the end of the world was a real possibility, that it might occur sooner rather than later. I think the economic collapse of New York in the seventies also contributed to that, so that in addition to the nuclear apocalypses in movies like *The*

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*Day After*, you get films like *Escape from New York*, where Manhattan has been turned into a prison island. When I was growing up, New York seemed a little like that, and I felt, watching that film, that this was my world and I was right at home.

In a larger sense, I am interested in apocalyptic narratives as an anxiety management strategy. Ironically, I think that the anxiety that they manage is not a fear that the world is ending but a fear that the world is changing. Apocalyptic narratives are an old phenomenon; they get constructed not, generally speaking, in response to a real sense of the world ending but in response to the sense of the real world being transformed. It is easier to fantasize that the world will end than it is to engage with the reality that the world will be different.

**aspeers:** In your extensive essay “Destroy All Monsters,” you write about the popular game *Dungeons and Dragons*, which is also featured as a motif in *The Night Ocean*. Are you more interested in the game as a social phenomenon or in the role of monsters in it?

**La Farge:** I’m attached to the social world of that game, because I participated in it for so long. For me, it was a way of making friends, because I was kind of a strange kid. I still love the idea that people who have trouble finding a place in normative society could participate in what is essentially a collaborative storytelling project and find new roles of social relations by doing so. The interesting thing about the kind of imaginative play that happens in *Dungeons and Dragons* is not the monsters themselves but the social engagement that happens around them and the negotiations between human beings about how to deal with all that has happened in the course of confronting them. The actual killing of the monsters turns out to be a fairly mechanical activity.

**aspeers:** What do you think of the current state of science fiction as a genre? Do you think the golden age of science fiction is going to return?

**La Farge:** Yes, I think it will return, but we’ll call it literary fiction. Science fiction is now being written by the people who write good mainstream fiction: Murakami, Ishiguro, Kelly Link, Shelley Jackson, even Cormac McCarthy. The great works by science fiction authors are now just passing immediately into mainstream. Junot Díaz is a science fiction writer, Jennifer Egan, Dave Eggers ... Colson Whitehead wrote a great zombie book called *Zone One*. The overlap is almost complete.

**aspeers:** Do you think the progression in science has contributed to the state of the genre? Science has advanced to the point that it has become harder and harder to imagine any gaps in it.

**La Farge:** Yes, but what about string theory, or multiple universes? Or the idea that our entire universe is a hologram, which physicists are contemplating seriously. It

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would explain a lot! What about space travel? Yes, technology now can do that, but there's still a lot to write about. Nobody is actually on Mars ... What would that be like? There's no interstellar travel. Ultimately, what we have is a pretty fertile ground for science fiction with plenty of room to think about the possibilities.

**aspeers:** You teach creative writing. Do you often find your students interested in the topics of monsters and monstrosity?

**La Farge:** Insufficiently, from my point of view. I think the category of the monstrous and the horrible has dropped out of their imagination, and that is a real loss. I think that if you neglect those categories, you may end up with an inaccurate picture of reality and miss the point a little bit.

**aspeers:** What has your experience teaching creative writing in Europe been like, compared to teaching in the US?

**La Farge:** I've been surprised and delighted that the students I have taught here read very carefully and reflect on their reading. That makes teaching writing enormously easier, because teaching people how to write is really teaching them how to read. It requires students to read each other's work and then discuss their different points of view, which can't be done if they haven't read the work. So the fact that students are such good readers has made my work a lot easier—and also more pleasant and interesting.

**aspeers:** *aspeers* focuses on the work of European graduate students on a variety of issues related to the US. You have also lived outside of the US for a while. Do you see any particular advantages or disadvantages of this external perspective on the US?

**La Farge:** I see several advantages. The first is that, when I live in a country where I don't speak the language, the part of my brain that deals with language is working harder—not just for German but for English, too. I feel more engaged with the space of language, which, for a writer, is enormously useful. Second, I feel isolated in a way that creates space for action. There's something wonderful about how *Facebook* and *Twitter* make us feel connected to each other, so that we feel like, 'Okay, things are terrible, but at least I'm not alone in experiencing this.' That's encouraging, but at the same time, the constant iteration of concerns and the constant call to the same action feels, to me, numbing and a little paralyzing. It makes you engage in a very immediate way, but it shuts down the space for a more reflective action or for an action which takes more room. So being here affords me that room.

**aspeers:** In a fantastic world, what kind of monster would you choose to be and why?

**La Farge:** The temptation is always to say that you'd be a vampire, because they are so cool and immortal, but there's something a little unsavory about them, even about the Jim Jarmusch vampires. I'd like to be the cat Behemoth from Bulgakov's novel *The*

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*Master and Margarita.* Yes, I’d like to be a huge evil cat with a great sense of humor. That sounds like fun.

**aspeers:** We would like to finish this interview with an *aspeers* tradition: If you could have dinner with three famous American figures, dead or alive, real or fictional, who would you choose?

**La Farge:** You’re really opening the doors here. Let’s try this: Thomas Pynchon, Gertrude Stein, and Huckleberry Finn. Because I think that they would all like each other, and they’d get each other talking. Pynchon would be fun to meet, sort of a trip. Stein was a great conversationalist, very good at social interaction, which I’m not. And Huckleberry Finn, because how could you not?

**aspeers:** Would you prefer Finn uncivilized or after a hypothetical civilization?

**La Farge:** He can come however he wants to come.